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SUBJECT: HINDU EXTREMISTS ATTACK WOMEN IN MANGALORE PUB

REF: CHENNAI 350

11. (U) Summary: Approximately 40 male Hindu extremists on January 24 forced their way into a pub in Mangalore, Karnataka (300 km west of Bangalore) and attacked several women customers for "drinking in public and acting in an obscene manner." Local police took action only two days later, arresting the president of the Sri Ram Sena, who at first condoned the attack in a television interview, then later apologized for it.

12. (SBU) Summary, continued: Karnataka's BJP government gave no public explanation for the delay in taking action for the attack. Privately, an aide to the Chief Minister told us that the lack of a formal complaint caused the delay, an explanation that a local criminal lawyer told us was not credible. Nationally, the BJP leadership condemned the attack and distanced itself from the perpetrators. Some BJP supporters see the attack as part of a conspiracy to defame the party's first government in South India. Critics frame the incident as part of a larger drive to push a conservative interpretation of Hinduism on the state's citizens. End Summary.

An attack at Amnesia

13. (U) Approximately 40 men stormed into the "Amnesia Lounge" (a pub/nightclub) on January 24 in the coastal city of Mangalore, attacking several women and some men who tried to defend them. Videos of the assault, which showed the attackers slapping, pushing to the ground, and kicking several women as they chased them out of the pub, appeared on national television and can be viewed on the Internet. (The group apparently invited journalists to cover their rampage.) Pramod Muthalik, president of the Sri Ram Sena organization, admitted the group's role in the attacks in a January 26 television interview, though he was not in Mangalore during the incident. (Note: The Sri Ram Sena is a little known local group in Karnataka.). He said that the women's presence in the pub "violated Indian culture." He later reportedly admitted that the attack was "wrong" while insisting that it was necessary "to save our mothers and daughters."

Police intervene . . . but only after two days

14. (U) Police took no observable action to either stop the violence or arrest its perpetrators for at least 48 hours. (Note: Indian police frequently do not take steps to intervene or prevent violence when faced by mobs.) By January 29, however, the police reportedly had arrested 31 men in connection with the attacks. Police also arrested Muthalik on January 27 in Belgaum (350 km north of Mangalore), but for "distributing inflammatory pamphlets" on January 11 in west-central Karnataka.

15. (SBU) An aide to Chief Minister Yeddiyurappa told us that the delay in arresting the culprits was due to the lack of a formal complaint. He said the police took action "within an hour" after a formal complaint was filed. (We have not yet seen a public

statement from Karnataka's government explaining the delay in police action.)

¶6. (SBU) A Chennai-based criminal lawyer told us, however, that a formal complaint should not have been necessary for the police to act. He explained that the attacks constituted a "cognizable offense" (akin to the concept of prima facie evidence of a crime in American jurisprudence), which allows the police to take immediate action, even if there is no formal complaint.

The BJP's opponents pile it on . . .

¶7. (U) India's chattering classes, at both the local and national levels, have commented rather predictably on the incident and its aftermath. Renuka Chowdhury, Union Minister for Women and Child Development (and member of the Congress Party) publicly decried the assault as an "attempt to Talibanize India," admonished Karnataka's state government to "wake up," and demanded that it provide a detailed explanation of the event. She also expressed her "shock at the insensitivity" of such an act on the eve of India's Republic Day," and declared that "in a democracy such acts are not acceptable."

¶8. (SBU) Karnataka's state-level Congress Party president told us that the attack demonstrated the political tactics fostered by the BJP in the state. He explained that the police were unable to act in the absence of orders from the political executive. He also said that Hindu extremists in the state are emboldened by the relative lack of government action following the attacks on churches in Mangalore and elsewhere in Karnataka in September 2008 (ref A).

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¶9. (U) H.D. Deve Gowda, former Prime Minister and head of the Janata Dal-Secular (JDS, a Karnataka-based political party currently in the opposition), used the opportunity to excoriate Chief Minister Yeddiyurappa and his government. Deve Gowda told the press that Yeddiyurappa had "Talibanized" Karnataka, bringing in levels of intolerance hitherto unknown in the state. He also sarcastically noted that Yeddiyurappa had succeeded in bringing the "Gujarat Model" to Karnataka in only 200 days. (One of the campaign pledges of the BJP was to bring the economic and administrative success of the BJP-led state of Gujarat to Karnataka, ergo the "Gujarat Model.") Deve Gowda and other political opponents of the BJP, however, use the term to refer to a model of political and cultural intolerance that includes violence, like Gujarat's anti-Muslim riots of 2002.)

. . . While the BJP distances itself-----

¶10. (U) At the local level, the BJP's initial response was muted. An op-ed in The Hindu, one of India's most respected dailies, noted "it is impossible to ignore the total absence of shock and outrage in the remarks of Chief Minister B.S. Yeddiyurappa and Home Minister V.S. Acharya while reacting to the incidents." (The same op-ed also alleges that a group of Sri Ram Sena members also attacked a private party the same day, seriously injuring two people, and noted that at least 14 attacks by "Hindu vigilantes" have taken place in Karnataka since mid-July.)

¶11. (U) Yeddiyurappa at first dismissed the attack as "not worthy of his reaction," then called it "an unfortunate incident" and emphasized that the police had a "free hand" to respond to the incident. He also stressed that the Sri Ram Sena was not a member of the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella organization of conservative Hindu groups that includes the BJP. As national criticism mounted, the state government declared the attack "an unacceptable act of hooliganism." BJP party president, Rajnath Singh, condemned the attack and stated those who were responsible need to be booked. The BJP also distanced itself from the attackers, denying that any of them belonged to the BJP or the Sangh Parivar.

¶12. (SBU) A state BJP spokesman told us that attack was an attempt to defame the BJP's first government in South India and sully the image of Yeddiyurappa. He pointed out that the invitation extended to journalists to cover the attack "clearly pointed in that

direction."

What is the Sri Ram Sena?

¶13. (SBU) The executive director of the South India Center for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (SICHREM) told us that Sri Rama Sena members have been accused of occasional attacks on couples in parks and on beaches. He also said that Sena activists had gained some local legitimacy by hindering the transportation of cattle to Kerala, a practice generally carried out by Muslims to avoid violating Karnataka's ban on cattle slaughter. (Note: There is no known connection between the Sri Rama Sena and the BJP or the Hindu Nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.)

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Mangalore is a university town with a beach-like, casual atmosphere. It is not the sort of place where one would necessarily expect to find conservative vigilantism. Between the these attacks and the assaults on Christian churches in September, the town is becoming famous for all the wrong reasons as even international media has picked up on the story. However, it is not surprising these types of incidents occasionally flare up in a nation that has experienced recent rapid economic and social changes. As India starts to take off economically, clashes between modernity/globalization and tradition will occur. The attack has stirred a debate throughout India on whether "pub culture" is consistent with Indian values. The fact that India faces national elections this spring adds further complications. We can expect political parties of all stripes to seek electoral advantage from such tensions. When these types of incidents occur, however, Indians ought to be able to expect that their state governments -- responsible for providing security -- will react with more vigor than demonstrated in this incident.

SIMKIN